DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 136 935 PS 009 180

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TITLE Maternal Attitudes Toward Sex Roles Related to Children's Attitudes Toward Maternal Roles in Second and Sixth Grade Children.
PUB DATE Mar 77
NOTE 8p.; Portions of this paper were presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (New Orleans, Louisiana, March 17-20, 1977)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childhood Attitudes; Elementary School Students; *Employment; Middle Class Mothers; *Mother Attitudes; *Parent Child Relationship; Role Playing; *Sex Role; *Sex Stereotypes; Working Women

ABSTRACT

This study examines the sex-role attitudes of employed and non-employed women and their children. Subjects were selected from a middle class, relatively conservative suburban community. Fifty-two mother-child pairs (including 21 employed and 31 non-employed mothers) participated. The children were 12 male and 19 female second graders and 9 male and 12 female sixth graders. Mothers were administered three paper and pencil measures of sex-role identity and attitudes: the Bem Sex Role Inventory, the Wellesley Role Orientation Scale, and the Traditional Family Ideology Scale. Children were seen in individual sessions and asked to act out a puppet drama centering around their perceptions of the sex-role attitudes of various family members and the division of labor in the family. As predicted, children's attitudes toward sex roles were not simply related to whether or not their mothers worked, or to their own grade or sex, but were apparently related to their mothers' attitudes. (Author/JMB)

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ED136935

Maternal Attitudes Toward Sex Roles Related to Children's Attitudes Toward Maternal Roles in Second and Sixth Grade Children

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Portions of this paper were presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development. New Orleans, Louisiana, March, 1977.

PS 009180

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Miller (1975) has recently reported relations between the employment status of mothers and the sex roles attitudes of their kindergarten age daughters. Most relations were with highly specific behaviors which would have been available for the child's repeated observation in the home. For example, daughters of working mothers were more likely than daughters of non-working mothers to name their mother as the person whom they would ask to repair a broken bicycle. Such relations are extremely interesting since Hoffman (1974) has pointed out in a recent review of the literature that data relating maternal employment to children's attitudes are contradictory, largely because maternal employment is not a unitary variable. Mothers work for a variety of reasons which may affect their attitudes toward and interaction with their children. It is not employment status per-se but mothers' attitudes toward a variety of things, including employment, time spent with children, proper roles for men and women, and the role of husbands and fathers in child-rearing and housework which would be communicated to the child. Thus it is a mother's attitude rather than her employment status which is influential in shaping her child's attitudes toward sex roles. A mother who believes that women can play several roles both in and out of the home and is comfortable with these roles should have children who also expect women to have multiple interests, and to have children and to care for them because they want to rather than because they should. These children should feel that it is okay for a mother to work if she wants to, and should understand that some mothers might not like to remain at home all day.

The present study was designed to test these hypotheses. Mothers answered a questionnaire which included the Wellesley Role Orientation Scale, (WROS). The second and sixth grade children of these women were seen individually for sessions which included a family puppet drama centering on mother's life after breakfast when father has gone to work, and the children are in school. It was predicted that children's responses in the puppet drama would not be related to their mothers employment status, but would be related to mothers' sex role attitudes as measured on the WROS. Grade and sex of children were included as independent variables for exploratory purposes, since girls might preceive mothers' roles differently than boys, and older children differently than younger children. Since previous research in these areas is inconsistent, however, no specific predictions were made based upon grade or sex of the child.

Fifty-two mother-child subject pairs were included. Of these, 31 mothers were non-employed, and 21 employed. Thirty-one 2nd graders, 12 male and 19 female, and 21 6th graders 9 male and 12 female, were included in the study. Mother's data were obtained in group sessions. All 21 scoreable items of the WROS were included. These include statements about women s role in male-female relations, employment, careers, homemaking, and child-rearing. Women indicated agreement with each statement on a 7-point scale, from -3, "strongly disagree" to -3 "strongly agree". The puppet task was adminsitered to each child individually. After the scene was set by the experimenter, the child was given the puppets and asked to act out a scene. He or she was then asked a series of specific questions about what the mother in the drama did during the day. Did she work? Was she happy with her

situation? Four sets of issues were covered: (1) Why did the mother choose to work or not to work? (2) How did her children feel about her choice? (3) How did the father feel about her choice? (4) Should mother do all the work in caring for the children or the house, or should father help? Parallel sets of issues were explored in cases in which the child claimed that the mother did or did not work.

The WROS was scored as directed by Alper (1974). Responses in each section of the puppet drama were scored from 1 to 3, ranging from a stereotyped attitude that mothers "are supposed to" stay home and care for children to attitudes based upon doing what is best for herself and other members of the family. Total possible score for the four parts of the puppet drama then ranged from 4-12.

The results confirmed the predictions. A 2 (employment status) x 2 (grade of child) x 2 (sex of child) analysis of variance revealed no significant main effects or interactions. Children's attitudes, were not simply related to mothers' employment status, or to their own grade or sex. Together with the mothers' attitude data, however, this suggests that it is not maternal employment, but maternal attitudes, which influence a child.

First, the child's choice of a working or non-working mother in the puppet drama did not mirror reality. While the majority of children placed mother at home, the dissenters included offspring of both working and non-working mothers. Four of 31 offspring of non-working mothers, and six of 23 offspring of working mothers chose working mothers in the puppet drama. Perhaps the majority choice indicates that children prefer to have more of their mothers' time and attention, and also that they are aware that most

mothers do not work. In any case, in the 21 cases of a mismatch between the puppet drama and reality, this appears to be a choice on the part of the child rather than a reflection of the only situation he/she knows.

Even more interesting, the mothers' and children' attitudes are signit.cantly correlated, for males ($r = 0.41$, $p < 0.03$) for females ($r = 0.29$, $p < 0.05$) and for the total sample ($r = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$). Despite the many variables which might be affecting the results, these correlations are consistent. In the face of the difficulty in directly assessing the effects of maternal employment, these data are encouraging. They suggest that the commonly expected relations between mother-child attitudes indeed exist. In examining these relations, researchers must identify the particular attitudes which are likely to be transmitted to the child rather than "umbrella variables" such as maternal employment which group a number of diverse individuals together despite basic differences in attitude toward themselves, their work, and their children.

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Footnote

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